

Specialisation in the Profession of Industrial Design in Finland

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Industrial Design in Finland has changed a lot during the past ten years. Ten years ago industrial designers were only educated at one university. Today there are two universities and a multitude of polytechnics educating industrial designers. Ten years ago most of the Finnish industrial designers worked in small or middle-sized design agencies. There was very little specialisation; one office could do everything from toys to trucks. Today the biggest offices have a clear focus and even the design process has become a well-marketed commodity – only in order to make the use of strategic design as easy as possible for the customer. Ten years ago very few designers were employed directly by the industry. Today they amount to 30% of the profession in Finland. In the beginning bigger companies only used industrial design for operational product development projects. When the amount of in-house designers grew, the understanding of good design management as part of growing a strong brand became self-evident and design was used increasingly for strategic purposes.

Many things have caused this remarkable and rapid change within Finnish industrial design. The Finnish society has gone through some major changes; we have had both recession and an economical upswing within the last decade. The technical development has also had a great impact. New, electronic based industries have needed new professionals such as interaction designers and design managers. The technical tools of the industrial designers have developed; concurrent engineering has become mainstream and all students are taught to model in 3d. The Finnish government has initiated several programs, such as the design 2005! program, in order to boost the usage of industrial design in Finland. Also Nokia, employing some 25% of the Finnish industrial designers directly and even more indirectly, has had a big impact on the development of Finnish industrial design.

Core questions

There has been a remarkable change in industrial design in Finland during the past ten years. Why? How has the industry, technology, economy, government and education in Finland affected this?

Industrial design is currently far more specialised than it used to be (to be proven). Which are the specialisations and how do the individual designers choose them?

How does this phenomena relate to the development that has occurred in other similar professions, like architects and engineers? How or when has similar phenomena in design occurred earlier?

Goals & Methods

My research aims to get an overview of what industrial design is in Finland today, how it specialises and why. My methodological framework has its roots in traditional historical research thinking. The results of my research are qualitative and descriptive rather than statistical. I do not aim to create any new theory on how or why this process of specialisation happens but rather to present one particular case, the Finnish one, and point out some of the potential reasons behind it. The existing information on the profession of industrial design in Finland is very scarce and mostly based on the situation before 1990. Due to this much of my research on the current situation is done by using research methods from the social sciences. About 10% of the profession, some thirty individuals, are interviewed. The strategic selection of the interviewees has been done according to three different methods of selection. The first twenty of the interviewees were selected using two separate methods. Some interviewees were selected as typical cases of their specialisation. The same people often seemed to figure in press representing their own specialisation, as a recognized pioneer in their own area. Some of the initial interviewees were selected by a method of quotation, where possible fields of specialisation within industrial design were identified and the interviewees were selected as representatives for these fields. This method was especially used in the case of in-house designers where very little

published data is available. These interviews were then later complemented with further interviews, where the interviewees were selected using the snowball method; all interviewees were asked if they know other people that would be useful to interview (and for what reasons). From these individuals mentioned some were then further selected for complementary interviews. The results from the interviews are then compared to information from other sources in order to get the full picture of the situation. Understanding who we are as a profession and why might also help us to develop for the future.